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Author
Hutchinson, Joshua

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Incautious Stewardship of Library Collections:

Creating Collections Where They Don't Exist, Losing Collections Where They Do

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Introduction

This paper will examine the way in which libraries are stewards of collections—the ways in which they help maintain the integrity of a collection, preserve its existence, and ensure that it is in some way made accessible to researchers. Throughout this paper, reference will be made to a variety of collections in libraries where the author has worked. These references are made not necessarily to illustrate best (or indeed worst) practices, but to help describe the difficulties that libraries sometimes encounter as stewards of collections. This paper poses several questions to librarians and to scholars, chief amongst them, 'when is a collection no longer a collection?' The collections dealt with in this paper are primarily book collections.

Definitions

Within the context of a library, a ‘collection’ can refer to several different entities. This is not simply a definitional question but is important for contextualizing the different ways that libraries decide to understand and work with the collections in their care. Most broadly, all materials owned by a library can be referred to as its collection or collections. However, in the case of most institutions, this collection is not a discrete or intentional accretion of material that has been shaped and curated by one hand. Rather, it has been created, built, weeded and directed over a period of time (sometimes very long) by many people. Often, a library’s collection contains many ‘sub collections’ that have come to the library through a variety of means. It is these sub collections with which this paper is concerned—in particular, how the smaller collection maintains its identity while also becoming part of the larger library collection. Often, these collections will arrive in libraries either through donations or outright purchases. No matter how a collection arrives in a library, its character will significantly change once it becomes part of the library—it is impossible for it not to, as the purpose of the collection’s very existence has undergone a significant and dramatic shift.

Some of the difficulties encountered by libraries when dealing with collections arise from the recurring problem that libraries (and donors) often encounter: a question of motivation and desire. Many libraries have implemented donations policies that make it clear that they will only accept a donation if it fits within their broader collection—ie, evaluating a donation not as a collection, but simply on the merits of its individual parts. Libraries want to be able to say ‘no’. But they also want to be given unique and valuable material. Much of the variability that we will now explore is due to how ‘valuable’ the collection is considered to be in terms of its relationship with the wider library collection. If it can be integrated into the broader library collection, this is often the desired course of action from the point of view of librarians, as it makes managing the collection significantly easier. But this immediately dilutes or destroys the collection's identity.

In the ideal situation, a library will evaluate a collection before it ever physically comes to the institution in order to determine what the purpose of the collection will be, and how it can best be exploited in order to achieve that goal. This sort of determination can take into account the origin of the collection, its contents, the method of acquisition, subject matter, and other factors. All of this needs to be evaluated based on the context of the institution in question: for instance, a large research library and specialist institution might treat the same collection very differently.

Once this determination is made, the existential status of the collection will have been determined—will the collection continue to exist as itself, or will it become a part of a greater whole? There are direct physical and intellectual results to this and all subsequent decisions which are predicated on this initial conceptual framework. These decisions will impact both how the existence of the collection is recorded and how it is physically stored.

The ways in which a librarian can record collection information varies significantly. At the most basic (but, some would say, most useful) is the simple action of recording provenance information in the library's catalog record for a book. This can take a couple of forms such as a basic note reading "From the collection of Jeff Qiu", and can also include a field that allows a link to everything else that makes up part of the collection, or a link to all other books for which a person was a former owner, donor or inscriber.

In addition to this, it can be deemed important to physically keep a collection together—to make sure that it doesn't get scattered throughout the larger collection. There are several ways that libraries can choose to do this: by assigning the material a collection-specific call number; giving it a unique collection within library; or a variety of other methods that differ by local institutional practice. Sometimes this can extend to establishing an institution or some dedicated infrastructure surrounding the collection. Often, this is reliant not simply on the collection's perceived importance, but also due to financial considerations—has the collector given the library a lot of money along with the books? Was the library able to complete significant fundraising on the back of this purchase? If so, the collection will be more likely to have a dedicated space or service within the library

Libraries also install bookplates (both physical and digital) to create a permanent record of a book's provenance. Sometimes they will also record the information elsewhere, such as in an acquisitions ledger or in the order records within the ILS.

Finally, beyond the level of simple provenance, librarians can also record information relating to physical aspects of a book, such as recording inscriptions, physical condition or alterations, etc. The methods used in this can range from the relatively simple such as inserting information in the catalog record (e.g. "Contains signature of Rebecca Gower") to bespoke software solutions, such as the linked data application currently being developed in the papers of Jacques Derrida at Princeton University, which is focusing on annotations and dedications in presentation copies of books that were given to Derrida.[1]

[1] LD4P at Princeton, http://library.princeton.edu/cams/ld4p

All of these decisions: the importance of maintaining a collection's integrity, of recording its provenance and of making it easily and conveniently available to researchers—are made in the context of the time and place that the librarians are operating. There is often not the full historical context necessary for determining the importance of a collection, the financial or political wherewithal to treat it in a certain way. For a variety of factors, a collection may simply become lost inside a larger library collection.

Literature review

A literature review was done which covered two broad categories: (1) how scholars use book collections; and (2) how libraries process, maintain and record these collections. Some articles discussed how difficult it is to reconstruct a collection once it is disbursed or lost, while others considered various aspects of recording provenance information relating to constituent parts of a collection, including worries regarding the completeness and utility of that information.

Milton McC. Gatch details a scholar's efforts to track manuscripts from the Ess/Phillipps Collection, listing their appearance and reappearance at auction, and their disappearance into private hands—and eventual purchase or acquisition by large research libraries.[2] The author considers such libraries to be somewhat stable resting places for these manuscripts. The article considers that while a large collection can be known and accurately described, once it is disbursed the collection can be very difficult (if not impossible) to reconstruct or to find all of its parts. While the collection perhaps should be considered to now be lost, some manuscripts have

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[2] Gatch, Milton McC. "Disappearing Ess/Phillipps Manuscripts." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 111, no. 2 (May 2, 2017): 143–65. https://doi.org/10.1086/691545.

well-documented history which means that their provenance “can be traced from 24 November 1468 to the present day with only minor dark periods” which “makes the blood rush.”[3] Some libraries can be the source of bad information, such as the case of Ambassador University in Big Sandy, Texas, which briefly owned one Bible from the collection: “The library closed in 1997 and its holdings were purportedly sold… beginning in 2006, but the auction house says the manuscript was not part of its offerings. It continues to be listed in WorldCat—a reference to a library that no longer exists.” [4]

Bridging the gap between scholars and librarians, Caroline Duroselle-Melish[5] details a pamphlet collection in the Folger Shakespeare Library which was purchased by the library in 1951 and subsequently disbound. Duroselle-Melish describes the history of the collection—its purchase and subsequent treatment by the library—and the effects that treatment had on efforts to track and record provenance. Duroselle-Melish asks if it is “possible to trace the past life of bound pamphlets which individually and collectively passed through many hands many times, were assembled and disassembled, sold as new items then as used ones? How can we recover the many layers of provenance and uses of these texts? Is it worth the effort for works that, even if they are rich in historical content, are usually of ‘minor’ literary value?”[6] The description of how the collection was received, checked for duplicates, and then disbound upon arrival at the Folger is clear and well-documented. The importance of notes written on the pamphlets and binding—and the ability to decipher them—is made clear. The Folger librarians face challenges

[3] Ibid, p. 156

[4] Ibid. p. 162

[5] Duroselle-Melish, Caroline. “Anatomy Of A Pamphlet Collection: From Disbinding To Reuniting.” *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 111, no. 2 (May 2, 2017): 185–202. https://doi.org/10.1086/691727.

[6] Ibid., p. 186

recording provenance information within their catalog because the act of disbinding the pamphlets caused their connections to each other to be lost to researchers. However, some information was retained in the library catalog and would perhaps be useful in digitally reuniting the pamphlets with their bindings. Duroselle-Melish suggests that libraries should engage in rebuilding these connections whenever possible.

Marcia Reed's introduction to the proceedings of the conference at which Duroselle-Melish and McC. Gatch presented describes the goals of the conference: "we sought to demonstrate why detailed and complete provenance is integral to contemporary collecting and to bibliographical scholarship…"[7] Provenance, "is truly the foundation, or the *why* of what we collect."[8] Reed points out that libraries traditional privilege historical provenance information and sometimes fail to "document[…] our current transactions with dealers, collections, and collectors…"[9] Provenance information can 're-create past libraries'. It contextualizes in a way that sometimes reveals important information about social or cultural concepts.[10]

M Winslow Lundy considers a collection of mid-20th century books about mountaineering in the University of Colorado, Boulder.[11] The decision to record provenance in this collection (which under usual cataloging guidelines would not have been recorded) evolved as catalogers were able to view more signatures, decipher them, and recognize patterns. Catalogers developed criteria on when to

7 Reed, Marcia. "'Lost in the Fog of the Past': Introductory Remarks on the Subject of Provenance." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 111, no. 2 (May 2, 2017): 135–42. https://doi.org/10.1086/691713.

8 Ibid., p. 137

9 Ibid., p. 137

10 Ibid., p. 138

11 Lundy, M. Winslow. "Provenance Evidence in Bibliographic Records." *Library Resources & Technical Services* 52, no. 3 (July 2008): 164–72.

record provenance: “(1) the names of the former owners were distinctive; (2) the inscriptions in the books revealed something intriguing or significant about those who had written them; and (3) the names were known to be those with connections to mountaineering, whether local Colorado residents or world-class mountaineers.”[12] Lundy aptly states that “[c]onducting further research into the intriguing topic of the history of the Courten family is left for others to pursue, but the catalogers of the books have created the first step to identifying the owners of the books.”[13] Cataloging notes enable researchers to access information and provide the foundation for provenance research.

Sarah Brown wrote about the role of books in the Germaine Greer Archive at the University of Melbourne Archives.[14] She examines how books, “by virtue of their inclusion in the Greer Archives” are more important as archival records due to their provenance, context and connections with other items and series in the collection, and she questions how this information can best be captured in the course of what she terms “bare-bones library cataloging.”[15] Brown considers two significant deposits of books from Greer to be placed in the archives and writes that these two “collections were created for different purposes” and that these purposes should help to inform the way they’re treated by archivists. Brown writes that her “work on the books in the Greer Archive has highlighted to me that a book is often more than a book. Their value… is also strongly developed by the archivists who… appraise and select, then go on to process a collection” and points out that this processing is

[12] Ibid., p. 168.
[13] Ibid., p. 170.
[14] Brown, Sarah. “Books as Archival Objects.” Archives and Manuscripts 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 49–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2017.1410189.
[15] Ibid page 51

a crucial step in determining and maintaining the value of the collection (and the individual items within it).[16]

Case studies

This paper will present several examples in order to help define what a collection within a large academic library might mean. These examples will demonstrate how libraries can lose information, how they try to recreate it, and how information, while still extant and preserved, can be functionally lost. Some questions will be raised—about both the way that libraries deal with collections, and more fundamentally, about what constitutes a collection:

- Does a collection of books remain a discrete collection, even if it's been incorporated into the broader library collection?
- What about if the donation information is recorded somewhere, and there are bookplates in the books?
- What if there are just bookplates in the books, and there's no other record? In this case, there is no way of physically reconstituting the collection or studying it as a collection, so it is functionally lost to scholarship.
- If a collection exists in a library, but nobody knows where it came from, what connects the material, or why it's in the library? Is there any purpose in maintaining the fiction that it is a collection? Is it a collection?

Case study: Harold William Vazeille Temperley

The University Library (UL) of the University of Cambridge in the UK holds a variety of donated collections stretching back hundreds of years, some of which formed the original basis of the library. The UL is over 600 years old, and traces its founding to

[16] Ibid page 57

a chest of books that formed the initial ‘collection’ of the library. Perhaps apocryphally, only one book from that original collection survives—demonstrating that libraries struggle to maintain the integrity of their own collections.

By the 20th century, the UL received donations and often incorporated the volumes into the library’s main collection, scattering the volumes throughout the open and closed stacks, as well as the rare books department. A cataloging project in the early 2010s aimed to highlight collections (particularly donated collections) that were held by the library but were mostly hidden. The goals here were many, including: (1) retaining and recording the institutional memory of these collections; (2) highlighting unique and distinctive collections became somewhat of an institutional priority as the library encouraged new donations and adapted to meet the changing requirements of a large research library (which in part meant adapting to new areas of research interests).

Upon his death, Harold William Vazeille Temperley (1879-1939) bequeathed some of his books to the UL. Temperley was a professor of modern history and master of Peterhouse College, and specialized in the diplomatic history of the early 20th century with a particular emphasis on the history of the First World War and the inter-war period. Temperley attended the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and wrote about Polish and Czechoslovak history. The books he gave to the library are approximately 150 volumes, chiefly in French. He died in 1939, and the University Librarian dated his entry of the donation in the ‘Registry of Donations Received’ as 29th August-3rd September, 1939. Upon receipt, the books were scattered throughout the library including in the appropriate classification ranges of theopen stacks and the rare books room. Considering the focus of the collection and the date it arrived in the library, this is a compelling story, all of which is told in the bookplates and provenance notes that are used in the catalog records. But because the books are disbursed throughout the library, they would not generally be considered a ‘collection’. Scholars cannot examine them in the same way they would a collection that had been kept physically intact. Other benefits have accrued, however library patrons have been able to consider these books on their own merits, rather than seeing them first and foremost as part of Temperley’s collection.

Case Study: French Play Collection (Unbound)

The next example comes from the University of California, Irvine (UCI). In 2017 a book truck containing 25 boxes of material was sent to the cataloging department. Nobody in the Special Collections, Cataloging or any other department knows the origin of this material. The collection consists of several hundred plays in French and English, published in the 18th and 19th centuries. The collection had, at some point received minimal local processing: each play was in an archive-quality envelope, with bibliographic information typed on the outside of the envelope. Attached (with a paperclip) to each envelope was a vendor-provided slip with some bibliographic and purchase information, and a printout from a dot-matrix printer. There was also a slip of paper accompanying each play that indicated that all had been searched in the local catalog at some point in time. Besides a field “P.O. [purchase order] date” on some of the vendor slips, there was no indication of when this material arrived at UCI. The P.O. date on many of the slips was 11-11-67. So, it appears that somebody bought this material a long time ago, but why? Was it for a specific pedagogical use? If so, the academic or researcher who was going to use it has almost certainly died now. But what about if somebody gave this material to the library, or gave UCI money specifically to buy it? No institutional memory of this collection remains, and no records have been found.

Should UCI endeavor to keep it together? When cataloged, a local field in the catalog record was assigned ensuring that all titles are browseable (the collection was given a title, the “French play collection (unbound)”). But it’s uncertain what that achieves. The people who processed it, the title means something. But for others, it’s a meaningless title for a collection that may have meaning, or may not. At this stage, nobody knows. If it did, that information has been well and truly lost by the library. So is this still a collection? I would venture to say no. But maybe a rare books scholar would be able to make a compelling case that it is.

Consider the examples of Temperley’s collection and the French play collection. Temperley’s collection was almost certainly curated before it was accessioned into the library—he probably owned more books that either were not offered to the library or were not accepted if they were. Once it was received, it was recorded in a list, a bookplate was attached to each book, and then it was treated almost exactly like any other newly acquired book. The French Play Collection exhibits some of the same characteristics, but to what extent is uncertain: it was certainly curated but to what criteria or by whom is uncertain. It too has been dispersed, but only within the Rare Books collection, and so remains essentially intact.

Case Study: A.G. Parker Cinema Collection

The A.G. Parker Cinema Collection was given to the UL upon the death of A.G. Parker. It does an excellent job highlighting the different roles a collection can play within a library. It contains rare monographs and periodicals about cinema. The author went with the library van to pick up the collection. It was packed into 40 or

50 boxes and cleared out of Mrs Parker's house. Following the packing process a librarian spoke with her. The conversation included this paraphrased exchage:

> Librarian: You must be sad to see all of these books go. (thinking: this collection was one of your husband's projects, so seeing that leave the house must be another reminder of the finality of death. Maybe I should reassure you that the library will treat the books well and manage the collection in his name.)
>
> Her: No, not at all. I'm glad to have my guest bedroom back.

Many collections reflect the passions and interests of the collector, and one of the reasons that we wish to preserve collection information is to provide a context to their intellectual development and thought. And in a way that's true with this collection as well.

A.G. Parker was for many years the head of acquisitions at the library.[17] He was in charge of buying books. He was also passionate about cinema, and especially silent cinema. Over the course of his many decades working at the library, whenever the title of a book crossed his desk that he thought would be useful for the library, but a purchase couldn't quite be justified, he purchased the book himself. His goal for the project was to donate all the books to the library at some point. He cataloged the books, labelled them, and also donated a card catalog of his own creation. He was a true librarian. And the goal of this collection was, from its inception, for it to become part of the UL's collection.

The introduction for this conference states, "Collections of all kinds and scales are created, held, contained, preserved, stored, and consequently record the

[17] "Parker Cinema Collection" https://europeancollections.wordpress.com/2017/04/18/parker-cinema-collection/

instantiation of something of value to an individual or a community.” The A.G. Parker Cinema Collection asks several pertinent questions about the value of a collection when it was never collected to be a distinct collection, separate from the main library collection. Chief amongst these questions: is it truly a collection when it was never intended to be a stand-alone collection of material? Ironically (and perhaps because the donor was a former librarian and colleague) this collection was well described, with bookplates, notes in the catalog record and a unique collection number attached to each book. The provenance was well recorded!

Case Study: George Cukor books

The UCI Libraries contain a small number of books containing the bookplate of George Cukor. UCI is based in Irvine, California, approximately 50 miles south of Hollywood. Probably as a result of this, the special collections department at UCI has some books that were formerly owned by well-known Hollywood figures. George Cukor (1899-1983) was an Oscar-winning director of many films including My Fair Lady and the 1954 A Star is Born.

While cataloging, Cukor’s bookplate stands out because of its visually striking nature. But UCI cataloging policy is generally not to mention bookplates except in exceptional circumstances. Having seen a few, some catalogers started adding notes in records for volumes from Cukor’s collection, but many had already been processed without notes. Nobody at UCI knows specifically how the library came to acquire these books, where they came from or how many we have. Given UCI’s location and current research interests (such as LGBTQ history and film studies), it is entirely conceivable that a researcher might want to know what books Cukor had in his library.

But UCI hasn’t been consistent about adding provenance notes for Cukor, so even as books are going through the catalogers now, they might see a bookplate but not record it. And in a way, rightly so: his is not a collection at UCI. However UCI acquired this material (whether it was an auction or estate sale after Cukor’s death, a conscious collecting decision by some previous librarian or donor, or whether it just came to us by happenstance) it is here now and mixed into the general Special Collections holdings. Cukor’s library is not necessarily lost, but… it’s very hard to find. UCI will probably never know how many Cukor books are in its collection, and will not be able to connect them to films he worked on, authors he knew, or the intellectual process he went through in creating his masterpieces.

Conclusion

This conference was organized in part to interrogate the question of when a collection is a collection. This chapter asks further questions relating to libraries and book collections: what causes a library to treat a collection in the way it does, and what causes a collection to be ignored by libraries. This chapter takes four examples and asks how libraries have integrated books into their collections, strengthening or weakening the ties between the books that form the collections.

Libraries have their institutional goals and missions. These sometimes are helped by highlighting collections and maintaining the ties between the books within them. However, sometimes these collections are either meaningless or don’t help libraries to achieve their goals so performing this work is either not useful or simply not worth the time for a library. Therefore a library can let a donated collection disappear within its larger collection.

Libraries can be good stewards of collections. But equally sometimes they aren’t. The reasons for this can depend on the specifics of the collection, the needs of the library, and a variety of other factors. But as this chapter has demonstrated, libraries may make the conscious decision to accept books in a collection while effectively destroying the collection itself, or they may unconsciously destroy a collection by simply not recording the information in any meaningful or retrievable way. This destruction may be meaningful, but not all collections are created for the purpose of long-term or perpetual existence. Some are made in order to be destroyed. And some are simply submitted to the inadvertent destruction of being forgotten.